

Literary Terms

Allegory - is a story in which people, things, and actions represent an idea or a generalization about life; allegories often have a strong moral or lesson.

Allusion - is a literary reference to a familiar person, place, thing, or event.

Analogy - is a comparison of two or more similar objects, suggesting that if they are alike in certain respects, they will probably be alike in other ways as well.

Anecdote - is a short account of an interesting event used to make a point.

Antagonist - is the person or force working against the protagonist, or hero, of the work.

Autobiography - is an author's account of her or his own life.

Biography - is the story of a person's life written by another person.

Caricature - is a picture or an imitation of a person's features or mannerisms exaggerated in a comic or absurd way.

Character Sketch - is a short piece of writing that reveals or shows something important about a person or fictional character.

Characterization - is the method an author uses to create believable people.

Climax - is usually the most intense point in a story. A series of struggles or conflicts build a story or play toward the climax.

Comedy - is literature in which human errors or problems appear funny. Comedies end on a happy note.

Conflict - is the problem or struggle in a story that triggers the action. There are five basic types of conflict.

Person vs. Person: One character in a story has a problem with one or more of the other characters.

Person vs. Society: A character has a problem with some element of society: the school, the law, the accepted way of doing things.

Person vs. Self: A character has a problem deciding what to do in a certain situation.

Person vs. Nature: A character has a problem with nature; heat, cold, a tornado, an avalanche, or any other element of nature.

Person vs. Fate (God): A character must battle what seems to be an uncontrollable problem. Whenever the conflict is an unbelievable or strange coincidence, it can be attributed to fate or an act of God.

Context: is the set of facts or circumstances surrounding an event or a situation in a piece of literature.

Denouement: is the final solution or outcome of a play or a story.

Dialogue: is the conversation carried on by the characters in a literary work.

Diction: is word choice based on correctness, clearness, or effectiveness.

Archaic: words are those that are old-fashioned and no longer sound natural when used, as "I believe thee not" for "I don't believe you"

Colloquialism: is an expression that is usually accepted in informal situations and certain locations, as in "He really gets my goat"

Jargon: (technical diction) is the specialization language used by a specific group, such as computer users: *override*, *interface*, *download*.

Profanity: is language that shows disrespect for something regarded as sacred.

Vulgarity is language that is generally considered crude and offensive. They are sometimes used in fiction to add realism.

Slang: is the informal language used by a particular group of people, it is used in fiction to lend color and feelings: *awesome*, *chill*, *no way*.

Didactic: literature instructs or presents a moral or religious statement.

Drama: is the form of literature known as plays: but drama also refers to the type of serious play that is often concerned with the leading character's relationship to society.

Dramatic monologue: is a literary work (or part of a literary work) in which a character is speaking about him- or herself as if another person were present. The words of the speaker reveal something important about his or her character.

Empathy: is putting yourself in someone else's place and imagining how that person must feel. The phrase "What would you do if you were in my shoes?" is a request for one person to empathize with another.

Epic: is a long narrative poem that tells of the deeds and adventures of a hero.

Epigram: is a brief, witty saying or poem often dealing with its subject in a satirical manner.

“There never was a good war or a bad peace.” Ben Franklin

Epiphany: is a sudden perception (moment of understanding) that causes a character to change or act in a certain way.

Epitaph: is a short poem or verse written in memory of someone.

Epithet: is a word or phrase used in place of a person’s name; it is characteristic of that person: Alexander the Great, Material Girl, Ms. Know-It-All.

Essay: is a piece of prose that expresses an individual’s point of view; usually, it is a series of closely related paragraphs that combine to make a complete piece of writing.

Exaggeration: is overstating or stretching the truth for specific effect.

“My shoes are killing me!”

Exposition: is writing that is intended to explain something that might otherwise be difficult to understand. In a play or novel, it would be the portion that gives the background or situation surrounding the story.

Fable: is a short fictional narrative that teaches a lesson. It usually includes animals that talk and act like people.

Falling Action: is the part of a play or story that leads from the climax or turning point to the resolution.

Farce: is literature based on a humorous and improbable plot.

Figurative Language: is language used to create a special effect or feeling.

Figure of Speech: is a literary device used to create a special effect or feeling by making some type of interesting or creative comparison.

Antithesis: is an opposition, or contrast of ideas:

“It was the best of time, it was the worst of times....”
Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Hyperbole: is an exaggeration or overstatement:

"I have seen this river so wide it had only one bank"

Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

Metaphor: is a comparison of two things in which no word or comparison is used:

"A green plant is a machine that runs on solar energy."

Scientific American

Metonymy: is the substituting of one word for another related word:

The White House has decided to create more public service jobs.

(White House is substituted for president)

Personification: is a literary device in which the author speaks of or describes an animal, object, or idea as if it were a person:

Simile: is a comparison of two things using the word *like* or *as*:

"She stood in front of the altar, shaking like a freshly caught trout."

Mayo Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Understatement: is a way of emphasizing an idea by talking about it in a restrained manner:

"Aunt Polly is prejudiced against snakes." (She was terrified of them.)

Mark Twain, *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Flashback: is returning to an earlier time for the purpose of making something in the present more clear.

Foil: is someone who serves as a contrast or challenge to another character.

Foreshadowing: is giving hints or clues of what is to come later in the story.

Genre: refers to a category or type of literature based on its style, form, and content. The mystery novel is a literary genre.

Gothic Novel: is a type of fiction that is characterized by gloomy castles, ghosts, and supernatural happenings--creating a mysterious and sometimes frightening story. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is probably the best known gothic novel still popular today.

Hubris - derived from the Greek word *hybris*, means "excessive pride." In Greek tragedy, hubris is often viewed as the flaw that leads to the downfall of the tragic hero.

Imagery - is the use of words to create a certain picture in the reader's mind. Imagery is usually based on sensory details.

"The sky was dark and gloomy, the air was damp and raw, the streets were wet and sloppy."

Charles Dickens, -*The Pickwick Papers*

Impressionism: is the recording of events or situations as they have been impressed upon the mind. A writer shares her impressions of flying in an airplane for the first time:

"As the plane broke through the clouds, I felt like I had entered a new world. The clouds stretched into eternity like a puffy mountain range. Subtle colors of pink and lavender touched the landscape. I longed to dive into the perfect softness of the beckoning blanket."

Irony: is using a word or phrase to mean the exact opposite of its literal or normal meaning. There are three kinds of irony:

Dramatic irony, in which the reader or the audience sees a character's mistakes or misunderstandings, but the character does not;

Verbal irony, in which the writer says one thing and means another:

"The best substitute for experience is being thirteen."

Irony of Situation, in which there is a great difference between the purpose of a particular action and the results.

Local Color: is the use of language and details that are common in a certain region of the country:

"Memphis ain't a bad town, for them that like city life."

William Faulkner, *Light in August*

Malapropism: is the type of pun, or play on words, that results when two words become jumbled in the speaker's mind. The term comes from a character in Sheridan's comedy *The Rivals*. The character, Mrs. Malaprop, is constantly mixing up her words, as when she says, "as headstrong as an allegory (she means alligator) on the banks of the Nile"

Melodrama: is an exaggerated form of drama (as in television soap operas) characterized by heavy use of romance, suspense, and emotion.

Memoir: is writing based on the writer's memory of a particular time, place, or incident. *Reminiscence* is another term for memoir.

Mood: is the feeling a text arouses in the reader: happiness, peacefulness, sadness, and so on.

Moral: is the particular value or lesson the author is trying to get across to the reader. The "moral of the story" is a common phrase in Aesop's fables.

Motif: is the term for an often-repeated idea or theme in literature. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is constantly in conflict with the "civilized" world. This conflict becomes a motif throughout the novel.

Myth: is a traditional story that attempts to justify a certain practice or belief or to explain a natural phenomenon.

Narration: is writing that relates an event or a series of events: a story.

Narrator: is the person who is telling the story.

Naturalism: is an extreme form of realism in which the author tries to show the relation of a person to the environment or surroundings. Often, the author finds it necessary to show the ugly or raw side of that relationship.

Novel: is a lengthy fictional story with a plot that is revealed by the speech, action, and thoughts of the characters.

Novella: is a prose work longer than the standard short story, but shorter and less complex than a full-length novel.

Oxymoron: is a combination of contradictory terms as in *jumbo shrimp*, *tough love*, or *cruel kindness*.

Paradox: is a statement that seems contrary to common sense, yet may, in fact, be true: "The coach considered this a good loss."

Parody: is a form of literature that intentionally uses comic effect to mock a literary work or style.

Pathetic fallacy: is a form of personification giving human traits to nature: *cruel sea*, *howling wind*, *dancing water*.

Pathos: is a Greek root meaning "suffering" or "passion." It usually describes the part in a play or story that is intended to elicit pity or sorrow from the audience or reader.

Picaresque novel: is a work of fiction consisting of a lengthy string of loosely connected events. It usually features the adventures of a rogue living by his or her wits. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is a picaresque novel.

Plot: is the action or sequence of events in a story. It is usually a series of related incidents that build upon one another as the story develops. There are five basic elements in a plot line.

Plot Line: is the graphic display of the action or events in a story: *exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.*

Poetic Justice: is a term that describes a character "getting what he deserves" in the end, especially if what he deserves is punishment. The purest form of poetic justice is when one character plots against another but ends up being caught in his or her own trap.

Point of View: is the vantage point from which the story is told. In the first-person point of view, the story is told by one of the characters: "I remember the summer I turned sixteen." In the third-person point of view, the story is told by someone outside the story: "The old man shuffled across the street. He looked down at the ground as he walked." There are three types of third-person points of view:

Omniscient: point of view allows the narrator to share the thoughts and feelings of all the characters.

Limited: point of view allows the narrator to share the thoughts and feelings of one central character.

Camera View: (objective view) allows the storyteller to record the action from his or her own point of view, being unaware of any of the characters' thoughts or feelings.

Protagonist: is the main character or hero of the story.

Pseudonym: (also known as a "pen name") means "false name" and applies to the name a writer uses in place of his or her given name. "Mark Twain" is a pseudonym for Samuel Langhorne Clemens.

Quest: features a main character who is seeking to find something or achieve a goal. In the process, this character encounters and overcomes a series of obstacles, returning wiser and more experienced.

Realism: is literature that attempts to represent life as it really is.

Renaissance: which means "rebirth." is the period of history following the Middle Ages. This period began late in the fourteenth century and continued through the

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The term now applies to any period of time in which intellectual and artistic interest is revived or reborn.

Resolution: or denouement, is the portion of the play or story in which the problem is solved. It comes after the climax and falling action and is intended to bring the story to a satisfactory end.

Rising Action: is the series of struggles that builds a story or play toward a climax.

Romanticism: is a literary movement with an emphasis on the imagination and emotions.

Sarcasm: is the use of praise to mock someone or something, as in "She's a real winner."

Satire: is a literary tone used to make fun of human vice or weakness, often with the intent of correcting or changing the subject of the attack.

Setting: is the time and place in which the action of a literary work occurs.

Short Story: is a brief fictional work. It usually contains one major conflict and at least one main character.

Slapstick: is a form of low comedy that often includes exaggerated, sometimes violent action. the "pie in the face" routine is a classic piece of slapstick.

Soliloquy: is a speech delivered by a character when he or she is alone on stage. It is as though the character is thinking out loud.

Stereotype: is a form that does not change. A "stereotyped" character has no individuality and fits the mold recorded as they occur.

Stream of consciousness: is a style of writing in which the thoughts and feelings of the writer are recorded as they occur.

Style: is how the author uses words, phrases, and sentences to form his or her ideas. Style is also through to as the qualities and characteristics that distinguish one writer's work from the work of others.

Symbol: is a person, a place, a thing, or an event used to represent something else: the dove is a symbol of peace. Characters in literature may be symbols of good or evil.

Theme: is the statement about life that a writer is trying to get across in a piece of writing. In most cases, the theme will be implied rather than directly spelled out.

Tone: is the overall feeling, or effect, created by a writer's use of words. This feeling may be serious, humorous, or satiric.

Total effect: is the general impression a literary work leaves on the reader.

Tragedy: is a literary work in which the hero is destroyed by some character flaw or by forces beyond his or her control.

Tragic hero: is a character who experiences an inner struggle because of a character flaw. That struggle ends in the defeat of the hero.

Transcendentalism: is a philosophy that requires human beings to go beyond (transcend) reason in their search for truth. It assumes that an individual can arrive at the basic truths of life through spiritual insight if he or she takes the time seriously about them.